

MICHIGAN SUPREME COURT



Office of Public Information

contact: Marcia McBrien | (313) 972-3219 or (517) 373-0129

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DOROTHY COMSTOCK RILEY, FORMER CHIEF JUSTICE, MOURNED BY MICHIGAN SUPREME COURT

LANSING, MI, October 25, 2004 - Dorothy Comstock Riley, who served the State of Michigan as a Michigan Supreme Court Justice, Court of Appeals judge, and judge of the Wayne County Circuit Court, was a “landmark in herself” who guided and inspired numerous lawyers, particularly women, said Chief Justice Maura D. Corrigan.

“Chief Justice Riley combined incredible strength of character with great grace - and she needed both, because she entered the legal profession at a time when women lawyers were viewed, and looked down upon, as a novelty,” said Corrigan. “Add to that the fact that she served as a judge at all levels, including four years as Chief Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court. Other women, including me, admired and emulated her. Her influence cannot be overestimated.”

Riley was the first woman to serve as a Michigan Court of Appeals judge and the second woman to become a Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court. She won election to the high court twice, in 1984 and 1992. She served as Chief Justice from 1987-91.

Riley, who was born and grew up in Detroit, received her undergraduate and law degrees from Wayne State University. After graduating from law school, she interviewed with a number of law firms. She said later that women lawyers were such a novelty at the time that her interviewers were only interested in how fast she could type. As a result, Riley practiced law on her own from 1949-55. She was appointed Assistant Wayne County Friend of the Court and later became a judge of the Wayne County Circuit Court.

With her husband Wallace Riley, she founded the Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society, which she served as honorary chair. Riley also played a key role in planning for the Michigan Hall of Justice. During the Hall of Justice’s October 2002 dedication ceremony, Corrigan praised Riley for her vision, saying that Riley conceived of the building as an open curve facing the Capitol, “like a pair of arms embracing and protecting democracy and the rule of law.”

Riley was initially appointed to the Michigan Supreme Court by Governor William Milliken in December 1982, but Governor-elect James Blanchard, who was to take office the

following January, argued that the appointment was not valid. In February 1983, Riley's colleagues voted 4-2 to remove her from the Court.

Asked how she was later able to work with the same Justices who had voted for her ouster, Riley quoted a favorite poem, "Outwitted," by Edwin Markham:

"He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in."

--MSC--